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AUTHOR McGree, Kathleen M.; Mutchler, Sue E.; Meister, Gail R.
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ABSTRACT

The Southwest Educational Development Laboratory produced a three-part series on the initiation of charter schools and their impact on education in the southwestern United States. This booklet marks the last of the series. It describes what early charter-school organizers in New Mexico and Texas proposed doing to create better learning environments for students, better working conditions for teachers, and more accountable and successful schools. The report is based on a systematic review of 24 approved charter-school applications in New Mexico and Texas. The review examines the proposed structures and programs in these schools against a framework--taken from James P. Connell's "First Things First"-- for successful school-site reform. The text highlights the extent to which charter-school designs in these states incorporate features that research and practice suggest will lead to meaningful change and improved educational outcomes for students. The analysis is organized to reveal trends and patterns within each state. The approach gives policymakers, educators, and parents a way to identify some of the educationally significant elements of the school environments that characterize early charter-school designs in New Mexico and Texas, highlighting these schools' potential to produce better educational outcomes for students. Four appendices describe legislative and charter-school information. (RJM)

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Designs for School-Site Reform

Charter Schools in New Mexico and Texas

Kathleen M. McGree

Sue E. Mutchler

Gail R. Meister

Southwest Educational Development Laboratory

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We also thank the principals and staff who helped verify or update charter school student and adult data in New Mexico and Texas. We hope our effort to reflect on the design of charter schools—their own and those of their counterparts in other communities—will provide useful information as they continually assess and refine the learning environments created for the children they serve.

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Introduction

Introduction

Over the last six years, the charter schools movement has generated considerable political and popular support in every region of the country. In 1991 only one state, Minnesota, had enacted charter school legislation. Since then, laws permitting the establishment of charter schools have been passed in a total of 25 states and the District of Columbia. As of January 1997, 428 charter schools were operating nationwide, and the number of proposed schools has nearly doubled each year since the first school opened in 1992 (RPP International & University of Minnesota, 1997).

The rapid expansion of the charter school movement is of particular interest in the Southwestern Region of the nation. Four of the five states served by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL)—Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, and Texas—have passed charter school laws (see Appendix A), and in Oklahoma, the legislature has considered charter school proposals during at least two legislative sessions. The number of charter schools in the Southwestern Region, as in the rest of the country, has also increased significantly over the last few years. In 1994, only four charter schools were operating in only one of the region's states—New Mexico. As of the fall of 1997, 28 charter schools had been approved to serve students in three states—Louisiana, New Mexico, and Texas—and the numbers will most likely continue to grow.

While it is difficult to predict how and how much the movement will expand in these states, policymakers, practitioners, and researchers alike are increasingly interested in the movement's progress nationally and the implications both for charter school participants and the public education system as a whole. In response to this need for information, SEDL has conducted an investigation into the initiation of charter schools and their potential impact on education in this region. The investigation has drawn from the best available research on education policy and practice to provide a meaningful context for considering issues in the Southwestern Region.

SEDL Occasional Papers on Charter Schools

SEDL has produced a three-part series of occasional papers that present the results of that investigation. Each paper in the series examines important aspects of the charter school movement as it has evolved in the Southwestern Region. *Redefining Education Governance: The Charter School Concept* (McGree, 1995b) explores the roots of the charter school concept especially in terms of shifts in authority and accountability. *Variations on Autonomy: Charter School Laws in the Southwestern Region* (McGree & Mutchler, 1998) analyzes the legislative variables that influenced the nature and scope of autonomy in the region's charter school legislation.

This paper concludes the series. It describes what early charter school organizers in New Mexico and Texas proposed doing to create better learning environments for students, better working conditions for teachers, and ultimately, more accountable and successful schools. The paper takes a careful look at the designs of these trail-blazing charter schools to determine the extent to which they represent models of school-site reform.

The paper is based on a systematic review of 24 approved charter school applications: four charter applications submitted in New Mexico in 1994, and 20 open-enrollment charter applications submitted in Texas in 1996.[1] The review examines the proposed structures and programs in these charter schools against a framework for successful school site reform. That framework is from *First Things First*, developed by Dr. James P. Connell of the Institute for Research and Reform in Education and currently being implemented in

selected schools in Rochester (NY) and Elizabeth (NJ), and districtwide in Kansas City (KS).

Purpose of This Document

This paper highlights the extent to which charter school designs in these states incorporated features that research and practice suggest will lead to meaningful change and improved educational outcomes for students. The analysis is organized to reveal trends and patterns within each state. This approach gives policymakers, educators, and parents a way to identify some of the educationally significant elements of the school environments that characterize early charter school designs in New Mexico and Texas. It also provides preliminary insight into the potential of charter schools to produce better educational outcomes for students and ultimately to motivate change within the broader public school system in their respective states and across the region.

Given the unique legislative context of each state, this information also furnishes policymakers with an early glimpse into how charter school legislation is translating into real schooling options for parents and students. Policymakers can begin to see how charter school designs address the particular educational needs of students in each state and how closely these designs match the intent of the law. The report also analyzes these initial charter school designs for evidence of conditions critical to school success. All of this information may prove particularly useful as charter school policy is shaped in the future.

A strong note of caution is warranted here. This examination includes only those features that are evident in organizers' formal *applications* to establish charter schools.[2] Accordingly, the features represent ideas, plans, and intentions, but not necessarily what was implemented, what currently exists, or what might exist in these charter schools. Documenting other features that might have been planned but are not apparent in the applications, or documenting the implementation of these features would require interviews, surveys, and on-site visits once all of the charter schools have become fully operational. Such documentation is beyond the scope of this inquiry. Further, assessing the effects of these conditions on students, staff, and families, or assessing educational outcomes would require even more intensive and comprehensive data collection, which is well beyond the scope of this inquiry.

Organization of This Document

There are three other major sections in the body of this paper:

Overview of Charter Schools in New Mexico and Texas. This section briefly presents the charter schools in New Mexico and Texas that are analyzed in the paper, and the framework for school-site reform that guides the analysis. It includes a description of the charter school applications in the two states from which information about charter school designs were taken.

Critical School-Site Features for Students and Adults. The following sections report on the extent to which charter schools designs in New Mexico and Texas contain elements of the framework, and some implications for policy and practice. This section is subdivided into three parts:

Relationships among Students and Adults. The first part analyzes evidence in charter school designs of conditions that promote the development of positive relationships between students and adults, namely lower student/adult ratios and continuity of care.

Student Standards and Opportunities. The second part discusses evidence in charter school designs of projected teaching and learning activities that foster students' academic performance and constructive behavior.

This information furnishes policymakers with an early glimpse of how charter school legislation is translating into real schooling options for parents and students.

Adult Engagement and Productivity. The third part reviews the evidence in charter school designs of working conditions that enhance staff commitment and performance.

Reconsidering Charter School Design. The last section of the paper summarizes the findings and their implications for policymakers and practitioners.

There are four appendices to this paper. Appendix A discusses the legislative context for charter schools in New Mexico and Texas. Appendices B and C give selected descriptive information of charter schools in New Mexico and Texas. Appendix D contains matrices that show the presence or absence of specific critical features in the designs of individual charter schools in the two states. Please note that the charter school applications were not written to address the critical features examined in this document.

Overview of Charter Schools in New Mexico and Texas

Overview of Charter Schools in New Mexico and Texas

Charter schools differ from one another. Aside from differences springing from their unique missions and programs, a major source of difference is the boundaries set by their states' charter school legislation. Texas's "strong" law permitted greater autonomy and freedom from regulation while New Mexico's "weak" law permitted less.[1] Moreover, the legislation allowed for the creation of only five charter schools in New Mexico, all of which were required to be existing public schools. In contrast, Texas's law permitted the creation of 20 "open-enrollment" charter schools along with additional charter schools of other types. Open-enrollment charter schools may be sponsored by any public or private institution of higher education, nonprofit organization, or governmental entity.

This paper is based on the proposed designs of four of New Mexico's five charter schools, approved in 1994, and all 20 of Texas's open-enrollment charter schools, approved in 1996 although only 19 had opened as of the 1997–98 school year. The designs are embedded in the narrative and attachments to the applications that these charter schools submitted to their respective state education agencies. It was these applications that were analyzed using the *First Things First* framework for school-site reform.

Charter School Applications

Charter school applications in New Mexico and Texas are particular to those states, but request similar information from school developers. For example, both states' applications request information about:

- name and location of the school
- grade levels and projected enrollment
- educational program and assessment system
- performance goals
- staffing
- governance structure
- budget and financial management
- community involvement and support
- assurances of compliance with legal, civil rights, and fiscal requirements

The Texas application requires such additional information as:

- enrollment criteria and special populations (e.g., economically disadvantaged, pregnant or parent students, migrants)
- facilities
- geographical area to be served[a]

Other information in the New Mexico application concerns:

- needs addressed
- scheduling
- extracurricular activities
- waivers requested

A First Look at Charter Schools in New Mexico and Texas

What do the charter schools in New Mexico and Texas look like? Appendix B (New Mexico) and Appendix C (Texas) identify each charter school in this study by name, location, geographical area served, grade levels, enrollment, and "theme" or distinctive innovative practices as well as target populations.

The four New Mexico charter schools include an elementary and a middle school, and two high schools. They range in size

from small (133 for one of the high schools) to large (1,081 for the middle school and 2,235 for the other high school). Three of the four schools are in suburban areas, though one high school serves rural as well as suburban areas. The other is in an urban site. All four schools expected to serve relatively large proportions of Latino students (between 36 percent and 58 percent across the schools) and Anglo students (between 20 percent and 56 percent). There are fewer American Indian and African-American students, though the proportions range widely across the schools.

The 20 open-enrollment charter schools in Texas include five elementary, four middle, and seven high schools, as well as three expanded secondary (grades 6 or 7 through 12), and one K-12 school. On the whole, the Texas open-enrollment charters are small. They range from an initial low of 24 students (in a high school for at-risk, recovered dropouts, and adjudicated youth) to 375 (another high school for at-risk and reentering dropouts). Even at full implementation, Texas charter schools remain relatively small: the largest projected enrollment is 600 at still another high school for former dropouts and students at risk of dropping out.

Charter school designs in New Mexico and Texas describe a variety of approaches to teaching and learning, or "themes." Most schools plan to adopt more than one. The themes include child-initiated or self-paced learning; individualized instruction; multisensory teaching; a Montessori or a Waldorf-inspired approach; thematic interdisciplinary curricula; broad family involvement in learning and support services for families; the infusion of technology; outdoor education; classical studies including Latin even for some elementary students; an International Baccalaureate program; employability training, career opportunities, and service learning; community partnerships; personal counseling and mentoring; gender-segregated classes; and longer school days and years.

Framework for Successful School-Site Reform

How good are charter schools and how should their quality be measured? Many observers of the charter movement contend[4] that it is too soon to evaluate or make definitive statements about the general quality or effectiveness of charter schools.[5] That judgment especially holds where charter schools have been operating for less than three to five years, as is the case in the Southwestern Region. Further, differences in state context affect how the charter school concept is configured for the unique political and educational needs of each state. New Mexico and Texas clearly differ in the context for the creation of charter schools. Individual charter schools, moreover, are set up to be new educational entities that reflect the diverse visions of their organizers as to desirable environments for teaching and learning. These circumstances all argue for the exercise of thoughtful care in taking the measure of charter schools.

Background of the First Things First Framework

This paper has adopted the *First Things First* framework for taking this look at charter schools. Assembled by the Institute for Research and Reform in Education (IRRE), with support from the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, the framework consists of an interrelated set of elements or school conditions that bear most directly on students' success—particularly students from economically disadvantaged communities.[6]

These elements are based on IRRE's research of successful schools, educational reform initiatives, youth development, and organizational development in educational and non-educational settings. The elements are also present to varying degrees in selected national reform initiatives, such as Ted Sizer's Coalition of Essential Schools, Ernest Boyer's Basic Schools movement, and Carnegie's Middle Grade School State Policy Initiative.[7] While IRRE maintains that the *First*

The First Things First framework consists of an interrelated set of elements or school conditions that bear most directly on students' success—particularly students from economically disadvantaged communities.

Overview

Things First framework does not represent a specific school reform "program" or "model," IRRE strongly advocates implementing the elements in an integrated manner in order to produce meaningful change in educational outcomes for diverse populations of students.

All the elements in the *First Things First* framework are under the direct control of schools. IRRE believes that they should be the priorities—"the first and primary focus"—of change efforts.[5] IRRE acknowledges that there can be alternate entry points for school reform, but holds that school-based changes will yield positive results in a relatively short time and with relatively little need for additional resources. Other elements that IRRE sees adding once the school-site critical features are in place include parent and community involvement, coordination with health and human services, and policy changes at local, state, and federal levels.[6]

Seven Critical Features of School-Site Reform

The elements in the framework constitute the critical features that IRRE believes are necessary and sufficient for successful school-site reform. The seven critical features are:

- lower student/adult ratios
- continuity of care
- high, clear, fair standards
- diverse and enriched opportunities to learn, perform, and be recognized
- collective responsibility for results
- instructional autonomy and supports
- flexible allocation of resources

	Critical Features for Students' Relationships with Adults	
	Lower Student-Adult Ratio	Continuity of Care
How to Achieve Critical Features for Students and Adults	Lower student/adult ratios by half during core instructional periods through redistribution of professional staff.	Provide continuity of care by having the same group of eight to 10 professional adults within each school level stay with the same group of no more than 120 students for extended periods of time during the school day, for at least three years in elementary school, all three years of middle school, and at least two years in high school.
Recognizing the Features in Charter School Applications	Difference between proposed student/adult ratios during core instructional periods and that ratio.	Organizational structures allow any one of three types of continuity of care: • throughout the school day (e.g., block scheduling) • across school years (e.g., students remain with same teacher for two or more years) • from an advisory program (e.g., students are assigned to a team of professional staff mentors)

TABLE 1: Definitions of Critical Features for Students and Adults from *First Things First* Framework

Definitions of Critical Features

Critical Features for Students' Standards and Opportunities		Critical Features for Adults' Engagement and Productivity		
High, Clear, and Fair Standards	Enriched and Diverse Opportunities to Learn, Perform, and Be Recognized	Collective Responsibility	Instructional Autonomy and Supports	Flexible Allocation of Resources
Set high, clear, and fair: Academic standards that define clearly what all students will know and be able to do within and across key content areas by the time they leave high school and at points along the way in their school career; and Behavioral (conduct) standards that are agreed upon by adults and students, reinforced by adults modeling positive social behaviors and attitudes, and sustained by clear benefits for meeting and clear consequences for violating those standards.	**Provide enriched and diverse opportunities:** To learn, by making learning more active, integrated, cooperative, and applied; To perform, by utilizing multiple and authentic assessments linked directly to standards; and To be recognized, by creating individual and collective incentives for student leadership, recognition, and consequences in academic and non-academic areas.	**Assure collective responsibility** by providing collective incentives and consequences for teaching teams and schools based on improvement in student performance.	**Provide instructional autonomy and supports** to these teams of teachers such that they can develop instructional strategies that will best meet the individual and collective needs of their students.	**Allow for flexible allocation** of available resources by teams and schools, based on instructional and interpersonal needs of students. Resources include people (students and staff); instructional facilities (on and off campus); instructional, planning, and professional development time; and discretionary funds.
Academic standards meet or exceed state standards and are explicitly communicated to students through individualized education plans or subject matter outlines. Behavioral provisions establish and enforce a code of student conduct; students take a role in creating and meeting standards; social and academic roles are articulated in individual student education plans; student mentors model/enforce behaviors.	Learning activities are described as **active**: "hands-on," "project-based," "student-initiated"; **integrated**: "interdisciplinary," "thematic"; **cooperative**: "partner activities," "group processes"; and **applied**: "relevant," "focused on job/career skills," "community-based projects," "programs to develop social skills"; "model integrity, cooperation, personal responsibility." Assessment is "authentic," e.g., portfolios, exhibitions, oral/written demonstrations, performances. Student recognition is formal (e.g., honor roll, money, prizes) or informal (e.g., assemblies, public demonstrations).	Provisions are made for development of accountability and incentives within and outside of team context, e.g., time for staff to meet; time for cross-team reviews; merit pay, recognition programs.	Teachers have authority to make instructional decisions; time to meet, plan, discuss instructional programming; opportunities for professional development.	School/team governance structures (e.g., local management councils, sponsoring boards, community advisory councils) permit flexible allocation based on students' needs and the extent to which adults most familiar with student needs play a role in resource allocation.

Why apply the framework to charter schools? The main reason is the good match between assumptions about charter schools and the theory underlying the framework.

IRRE stresses the interrelationship of these critical features, shown in Table 1, by grouping them into three clusters. The first cluster, comprising features one and two, describes changes that directly affect students and their experiences in schools; it affects students and adults by addressing the need of students to enjoy strong, positive relationships with adults. The second cluster, incorporating features three and four, stresses the equally important need for student opportunities to meet high academic and behavioral standards; it primarily affects students. The third cluster, aggregating features five, six, and seven, highlights the critical need of adults (administrators, teachers, other staff) for school conditions that maximize their engagement and productivity; it primarily affects adults.

Table 1 also describes what the critical features mean operationally. It includes an explanation of each critical feature and specific indicators for recognizing the critical features in charter and other schools.[10] These indicators supply the standard for measuring the quality of charter school designs in New Mexico and Texas in the next part of this paper.

Validity and Application of the Framework to Charter Schools

IRRE claims that implementing the framework will produce "better relationships among adults and students, higher levels of engagement and productivity by teachers and students, and ultimately, students who are better able to benefit from and contribute to society."[11] However, IRRE cautions that it cannot yet offer "conclusive scientific evidence for the First Things First framework's efficacy."[12] What IRRE does offer is a combination of scientific evidence and "common-sense arguments" for the elements and the framework as a whole. IRRE also offers a well-developed rationale and strategy for evaluating the framework.[13]

Why apply the framework to charter schools? The main reason is the good match between assumptions about charter schools and the theory underlying the framework. Charter schools theoretically will (1) produce direct and improved outcomes for students and staff; (2) allow school staff the flexibility and autonomy to make structural changes, implement instructional innovations, and allocate financial and human resources according to student needs; (3) promote reform in exchange for the investment of only minimal financial resources; (4) provide greater professional opportunities for educators and encourage a sense of ownership and investment among school staff, parents, and students (McGree, 1995a). Moreover, charter schools' enhanced autonomy and flexibility represent an ideal setting for the implementation of whole-school reform. Therefore, charter school designs might be expected to incorporate the kind of research- and field-based best practices and integrated reforms that the *First Things First* framework embodies.

Applying the *First Things First* framework to charter school designs is in fact one purpose for which the framework was developed. As its developers state, the framework "should be a useful lens through which to examine a wide variety of system reforms...including...charter schools...[The] framework provides a litmus test for whether these system and policy reform efforts have a clear and compelling vision for what schools must do to improve the life chances of their students."[14]

While applying the framework to charter school designs is appropriate, it is important to make explicit its limitations. One limitation is the framework's exclusion of components like parent and community involvement that are often central to charter schools. Other limitations are the constraints imposed by New Mexico's and Texas's charter school legislation and their application and approval processes. Readers should also bear in mind that the charter school

organizers developed their applications without the *First Things First* framework or any other research- or practice-based information to consider in designing their schools. Finally, readers are reminded that no analysis of charter school *applications* will yield a complete and accurate picture of charter schools in the two states.

The framework functions here not as an explicit evaluation tool but rather as guidance as to the core features of designs for highly successful and effective schools. The analysis attempts to avoid making judgments about individual schools. It discusses schools in the aggregate and illustrates with examples of specific programs or particular school designs. The analysis describes the schools by state in recognition of the different legislative contexts of New Mexico and Texas and the significant difference in the number of charter schools allowed in each state. However, there are thumbnail sketches of the individual schools (in the figures above) and matrices of school-by-school inclusion of the critical features (in the appendices).

Critical School-Site Features for Students and Adults

Relationships Among Students and Adults

The assumption is that better personal relationships with adults will yield greater student engagement and productivity that will in turn lead to enhanced educational outcomes; research supports this assumption.

The first cluster of critical features for students emphasizes the development of strong personal relationships with adults in schools who make their time, energy, and psychological resources available. The underlying assumption is that better personal relationships with adults will yield greater student engagement and productivity that will in turn lead to enhanced educational outcomes. IRRE (1997) cites research on youth development and education that supports this assumption. It applies particularly for minority and disadvantaged students, and especially when the relationships are consistent and sustained over time.

An assumption of the *First Things First* framework is that this cluster opens the way for the implementation of the remaining critical features. Without them, the diverse and innovative instructional programs for students, and enhanced professional opportunities for teachers that are fundamental to the charter school concept—and key to the success of school-site reform efforts—are less likely to occur. Or, if they do occur anyway, IRRE predicts that their impact will be diminished.

These two critical features specify how schools can structure in opportunities for strengthening students' relationships with adults. Both rely on increasing positive, substantive contact between students and adults. One of these critical features has to do with reducing significantly the ratio of adults to students during core instructional periods. The other concerns strategies for the same students and adults to extend such contact throughout the school day and across school years.

There is little definitive research on exactly how low student/adult ratios must be to affect student performance. IRRE (1997) reports evidence that small reductions (e.g., from 25:1 to 22:1) have little positive impact, while more dramatic decreases (to 15:1 or lower) can enhance student performance. IRRE suggests cutting typical student/adult ratios in half during core instructional periods by allocating all professional personnel in the school building to classrooms during core instructional periods.

Providing for continuous and sustained interaction between students and adults requires unconventional in-school schedules for middle and high school students[15] and new methods of assigning all students to teachers. To increase middle and high school students' time with the same group of adults during the school day, IRRE (1997) suggests lengthening periods (e.g., block scheduling[16]) or assigning groups of students to groups of instructors (e.g., teams, academies, or house plans), and/or instituting an advisory program where individual or small groups of students meet regularly with staff who guide and monitor their progress. The assignment of students at any levels to the same teachers or set of adults across school years provides for the continuity that fosters strong personal relationships. Along with giving students greater access to ongoing care and support from adults who have a shared, long-standing interest in their well-being, this arrangement has the added benefit of enhancing continuity in instruction. IRRE recommends a threshold of eight to 10 adults to the same group of no more than 120 students over at least two school years.

Most schools already have the potential to develop stronger student relationships with adults. The potential to lower student/adult ratios during core instruction and to provide continuity of care exists because of the number of certified or degreed adults working in school. The potential can be realized without a dramatic increase in funds only when *all* professional staff take on instructional responsibilities and participate more actively in students' learning (IRRE, 1997).

Recognizing These Critical Features in Charter School Designs

Lower Student/Adult Ratios. Since many of the charter schools in the Southwestern Region are new rather than existing public schools, it is impossible to determine whether individual schools have lowered their student/adult ratios by half. Instead, this examination highlights the contrast between student/adult ratios during core instructional periods and the ratio within the charter school in general. The difference between these two numbers[17] reflects the extent to which charter schools can potentially reduce student/adult ratios during core instructional periods in the future.

Continuity of Care. This examination of continuity of care in the region's charter school designs looked for any and all ways they intensify and sustain contact between students and credentialed or degreed adults.

Lower Student/Adult Ratios in Charter School Designs

New Mexico. With the exception of one school, there is little variation in ratios among New Mexico charter schools.[18] Two schools have 25 students for every adult present during core instructional periods. The third school's classroom ratio fluctuates slightly depending on grade level, but averages 22:1. Among these three schools, the ratio of students to professional staff schoolwide also varies only slightly, ranging from 13:1 to 16:1. On average, there are 39 percent more students per teacher in the classroom than per certified or degreed adult in these schools.

The fourth New Mexico school, Broad Horizons Educational Center, has sharply lower student/adult ratios. Designed to serve at-risk students, this charter school's classroom ratio is 8:1. Its schoolwide ratio of students to certified or degreed adults is only slightly higher, at 10:1. The difference between these two ratios is 20 percent, nearly half the difference in other New Mexico charter schools. This statistic suggests that almost all available adults are working directly with students during core instructional periods.

Texas. Classroom student/adult ratios in Texas's open-enrollment charter school designs range from a high of 22:1 to a low of 4:1.[19] The average student/adult ratio across these charter schools is 15:1, well below the Texas state standard for all levels of schooling. Of the 17 charter schools for which information was available, only four schools were planning for classroom student/adult ratios of 20:1 or higher. On average, Texas charter schools expected their schoolwide student/adult ratios to be 10:1. These ratios ranged from 16:1 to 3:1. Fully 10 of the 17 schools have ratios of 10:1 or less.

In two of these schools, the classroom ratio and schoolwide ratio are identical, indicating that *all* professional staff employed by the school are utilized during core instructional periods. On the other end of the scale, three schools' ratios differed by as much as 50 to 75 percent. Although no consistent pattern exists, smaller differences between classroom and schoolwide ratios are most prevalent among schools designed to serve students at risk of dropping out or students who have previously dropped out.

Continuity of Care in Charter School Designs

New Mexico. Two of the four charter schools in New Mexico plan to provide students with continuity of care across the school day. These schools will offer a fully integrated curriculum that will be delivered by teams of teachers sharing a group of students. In addition, teachers from each team will be responsible for monitoring the progress of a smaller number of students and providing them with additional guidance and support. In Highland High School, for example, a teacher/mentor plans to meet with the same small group of students daily and serve as the group's primary teacher advocate.

Few charter schools in New Mexico and Texas intend to implement conditions that would provide students with continuity of care that they need over time.

Texas. Eleven of 20 open-enrollment charter schools in Texas intend to provide some form of continuity of care over the school day. Six schools describe advisory arrangements in which one or more adults counsel, coach, or mentor a small group of students throughout their school career. All the charter schools designed to serve students who are at risk of dropping out or those who have already dropped out plan to implement such arrangements. In Blessed Sacrament Academy, for example, *individual* teachers work *daily* with *groups* of students on study, social, and career skills. The school also encourages all students and professional staff to meet as a community each day. In contrast, other charter schools using advisory arrangements have a *team* of counselors, teachers, and trainers meet *periodically* with *individual students* to review their progress and to provide guidance and support throughout the school year.

Three other charter schools plan to extend adult care of a single group of students across school years. Still two other schools plan to implement continuity of care across the school day in the form of block scheduling.

How Are Charter Schools Building Strong Student/Adult Relationships?

Although many charter schools in New Mexico and Texas indicate efforts to create small, personalized learning environments for students, few intend to implement conditions that would provide students with the continuity of care that they need over time to build stronger and longer lasting relationships with adults in school.

More charter schools in Texas than New Mexico are designed to offer smaller classrooms and to engage more of their school staff during core instructional periods. In addition to bettering the state standard for classroom student/adult ratios as a group, at least one in three Texas charter schools plans for 15 or fewer students per adult in the classroom. Only one of New Mexico's four charter schools has fewer than fifteen students per adult, and ratios in the remaining schools are significantly higher. The difference between schoolwide and classroom ratios is less than 30 percent in a majority of the Texas charter schools, while the difference is closer to 40 percent in a majority of New Mexico charter schools.[20]

Discrepancies in classroom size and the distribution of professional staff between charter schools in New Mexico and Texas are attributable, at least in part, to the legislative context of each state. Texas legislation gives charter schools control over their enrollment and all personnel decisions. Consequently, Texas charter schools can determine student/adult ratios both in and out of the classroom. Charter school organizers there can take advantage of this flexibility—and it appears that they have—to include smaller classes and flexible staffing in charter schools' designs.

New Mexico charter schools, in contrast, generally retain the same student population and staff they had before their conversion to charter status. Lowering student/adult ratios in these schools would require the redistribution of existing staff. Reassignment of otherwise non-instructional staff to take on instructional responsibilities may present difficulties. These staff members already have defined non-instructional duties that may not be diminished or reassigned, and they may resist "adding" responsibilities for which they have not trained or which they shed when they moved from teaching to specialist positions. Changes of this order can threaten not only relationships among adults but the personal and professional identities of individual adults as well (IRRE, 1997).

As to continuity of care, half of New Mexico's charter schools intend to implement comprehensive strategies that include multiple forms of continuity within the school day. These schools' plans combine continuity for instruction *and* for advising. The most prevalent form among Texas open-enrollment charter school designs, however, is a single form—

advisory–which is also the least intensive form of care. Many of the schools planning to adopt this approach are designed to serve individual students for only one year as they work toward their GED or complete high school graduation requirements.

While several schools indicate efforts to create small, personal classroom environments, few plan for school structures that will sustain continuity over time and thus allow students to build relationships with a single, stable core group of adults. Only five schools in Texas and the two in New Mexico highlighted plans to provide their students with more-intensive forms of continuity of care, such as block scheduling or assigning a single teacher or team of teachers to the same core group of students across several years.

The well-documented success of these two structural innovations in the literature (IRRE, 1997) makes their absence from the design of most charter schools surprising. The presence in charter school plans of structures that will give students access to adult support and guidance is commendable. However, the time frame may be too short for the development of deep, long-standing relationships between students and adults.

Having teachers stay with their students as they advance to the next grade level[2] brings its own set of challenges. While this practice provides students with greater access to ongoing support, it demands a great deal of educators. They must not only master new curricula and develop new materials, but they must also adapt to the changing developmental needs of their students.

What Can Policymakers Do to Promote Lower Student/Adult Ratios and Continuity of Care in Charter Schools?

The issues and policy solutions differ somewhat by state. Stronger legislation that provides blanket waivers enhances the flexibility that charter school developers have to institute these critical features. Texas charter school developers have taken advantage of this flexibility to lower classroom student/adult ratios significantly and to assign a majority of the adults in the building to instruction. A reexamination of rules about staff certification in charter schools may also be warranted. If current rules result in too few credentialed personnel in charter schools who are qualified to enter into the desired relationships with students, those rules may need to be tightened. Conversely, if current rules tie credentialed staff too tightly to out-of-classroom duties, they may need to be loosened.

At the same time, modestly increasing policy *guidance* (as opposed to regulation) can raise charter developers' awareness of the importance of these critical features and encourage charter schools to address them. One possible strategy for providing this policy guidance is crafting charter school applications so that developers are required to explain how they intend to promote the development of substantive, positive, and sustained student/adult relationships. Finally, policymakers can strengthen professional supports for these critical features through professional development offerings, networks, and materials. New Mexico's strong elementary school network of Coalition of Essential Schools is a model in this regard.

Policymakers can craft charter school applications so that developers are required to explain how they intend to promote the development of substantive, positive, and sustained student/adult relationships.

Standards or opportunities alone can leave students frustrated and defeated. When schools provide and clearly communicate both, students understand what is expected and have access to what they need to meet those expectations.

Student Standards and Opportunities

Another element in ensuring that students are engaged and productive and ultimately achieving improved educational outcomes involves setting standards and giving students appropriate opportunities to meet them. The *First Things First* framework's second cluster of critical features addresses the need for high, clear, fair standards for academics and conduct, and diverse and enriched opportunities for students to learn, perform, and be recognized. Standards *or* opportunities *alone* can leave students frustrated and defeated. When schools provide and clearly communicate both, students understand what is expected *and* have access to what they need to meet those expectations.

For purposes of discussion, it is useful to pry apart the several parts of these critical features. Academic standards in the *First Things First* framework refer to clear definitions of what all students should know and be able to demonstrate across key content areas. Equally important is the need for students to understand and be able to articulate what is expected of them academically.[22]

Behavioral standards refer to explicit definitions of expected student conduct and behavior. Students need to be aware of these standards, too, and of the consequences for violating them. The framework stresses student participation in the creation and enforcement of the standards, and points out that students also need opportunities to learn appropriate conduct. One important source for such opportunities is the adults in school who model positive behaviors.

Opportunities to learn are the design and offering of educational experiences that are most likely to give students the support they need to enhance their learning. The *First Things First* framework characterizes diverse and enriched opportunities to learn as experiences in which students participate actively and especially those that students initiate. These learning experiences will tend to integrate core academic subjects, incorporate cooperative and group-oriented activity, and apply in readily apparent ways to the real world beyond the classroom (IRRE, 1997).

The framework ties assessment into standards and opportunities, in particular authentic assessment strategies that recognize different modes of learning and employ multiple indicators of student performance. This aspect of the critical feature focuses on the school's movement beyond traditional, standardized assessment techniques toward multiple measures and toward more concrete descriptions and demonstrations of what students have learned. It emphasizes assessment techniques that link directly to academic standards and that recognize different modes of learning. According to IRRE, schools also need to create formal and informal incentives for student achievement and positive social behaviors. Specifically, schools need to provide students with opportunities to be leaders among their peers, to be recognized for their academic and social achievements, and to be able to showcase their own unique talents.

IRRE (1997) offers evidence from research in youth development and education affirming the importance of setting high, clear, and fair content and performance standards for students. There is also evidence suggesting that diverse, enriched, and authentic learning experiences help students develop a deeper and more meaningful understanding, and ultimately yield higher learning.

Recognizing These Critical Features in Charter School Designs

Academic Standards. The laws in New Mexico and Texas requires charter schools to meet or exceed state standards for curriculum and student performance. Texas schools seeking

charter status, for example, must specify the levels of student performance on state-adopted assessments that would be used to measure performance for the charter school as a whole. These schools may also describe any other accountability measures they will use. Nearly all schools do the former, and more than half include the latter in their applications.

The review of charter school applications noted the extent to which the individual schools set standards that exceeded state requirements and attempted to define these standards for themselves. Typically, the presence of this aspect of the critical feature was signaled by outlines of schools' own expectations for students across the key content areas. The review also looked for evidence of individualized education plans or other strategies to communicate academic standards to students—whether those standards are state-mandated or school-initiated.

Behavioral Standards. Charter school applications were examined for evidence that an explicit code of student conduct has been established and will be enforced. Evidence of a role for students in the creation and implementation of these standards was also examined.

Opportunities to Learn. The review looked for language in charter applications that conveyed the essence and philosophy of the educational program. Specifically, each application was examined for descriptions of learning activities that are active (hands-on, project-based, student-initiated), integrated (interdisciplinary, thematic instructional approaches), cooperative (partner activities, group processes), and applied (relevant, focused on life skills or job/career skills, community-based projects).

With regard to learning and meeting behavioral standards, the review focused on evidence in the applications that schools offer specialized social instruction or activities for learning and modeling positive behaviors.

Opportunities to Perform. Like all other schools in New Mexico and Texas, charter schools must participate in their state's accountability system and administer all state-adopted student assessments. Applications were examined for evidence that the charter schools are committed to using authentic assessment strategies (portfolios, exhibitions, oral and written demonstrations), in addition to the traditional measures required by state education codes.

Opportunities to be Recognized. Charter school applications were examined for evidence that the schools plan to recognize student achievement and positive student behaviors, either formally (honor roll, money, prizes) or informally (student assemblies, demonstration nights for parents and public). Applications also were reviewed for examples of programs designed to teach leadership skills and/or encourage students to exhibit leadership among their peers.

Academic Standards in Charter School Designs

New Mexico. Charter schools in New Mexico are required to design their curriculum around the state's competency frameworks and standards, and to meet or exceed state standards for performance. Charter applications in New Mexico do in fact emphasize the use of curricula that create high academic expectations for students. However, there is little specific evidence that content and performance objectives will be clearly communicated to students. Broad Horizons Educational Center is again the exception in that it plans to put in students' hands syllabi that spell out the core requirements and expectations for each course.

Texas. Applications for Texas charters uniformly meet the requirement that charter schools adhere to state content and performance standards. On the one hand, only four of the 20 open-enrollment charter schools indicate that they will

Slightly more than half of all open-enrollment charter schools in Texas intend to implement an explicit code of student conduct with clearly stated consequences.

interpret state standards within their own school context. Each of these applications explicitly outlines the academic standards that will be used in the school's core subject areas. On the other hand, fully 13 schools are on board when it comes to helping students understand what the school expects of them with regard to learning and performance. These schools say they will adopt one or more tools such as individualized learning programs, self-improvement folders, or self-paced instructional modules for that purpose.

Behavioral Standards in Charter School Designs

New Mexico. None of New Mexico's charter schools makes explicit an intention to establish high, clear, and fair behavioral standards for students. However, two schools' applications contain some information related to student conduct. Highland High School plans to add to its existing in-house suspension program and to implement a social skills program. Broad Horizons Educational Center indicates that staff will be selected who can be positive role models for students.

Texas. Slightly more than half of all open-enrollment charter schools in Texas intend to implement an explicit code of student conduct with clearly stated consequences. In addition, many of these schools highlight the development of responsibility, cooperation, and integrity as a key component of their instructional programs. Others mention adults working closely with students to model positive behaviors.

At the same time, it is generally unclear whether standards for student behavior and conduct are actually communicated to students, and whether students play a role in their creation and enforcement. The applications of only two schools specifically address the communication to students of social and behavioral expectations. Genesis Charter School relates that its student code of conduct is explained during an initial orientation meeting with each student and his or her parents. SER-NIÑOS Charter School designs an individual education plan for every student that includes explicit and personally-tailored social goals along with academic ones.

Only one of the 20 school designs in Texas describes plans to involve students in modeling and enforcing appropriate student behaviors. At Girls and Boys Prep Academy, small groups of freshmen students meet weekly with older student mentors to facilitate adjustment to school rules, getting along with peers, and mutual respect. Students who have been cited for misconduct have the right to request a trial by their peers. If granted, the trial takes place during this class period.

Opportunities to Learn in Charter School Designs

New Mexico. All New Mexico charter schools plan to offer students some form of active, integrated, cooperative, or applied learning. A fully integrated curriculum will be available in all four schools. Three of the four also plan to offer students applied learning experiences through community service projects and career exploration or work experience programs. Two of the four indicate that they will use a variety of hands-on experiences and allow students to regulate their own learning pace. The same two schools also emphasize cooperative learning activities and group learning processes. Turquoise Trail Elementary, for example, designed its classrooms specifically to accommodate cooperative learning, group decisionmaking, and committee work. All the dimensions of opportunities to learn will be available in one school, Broad Horizons.

In contrast to the universal presence of enriched and diverse opportunities to learn academically in New Mexico's charter school designs, only one makes explicit mention of strategies to help students acquire social skills and/or model positive student behaviors.

Texas. All open-enrollment charter schools in Texas plan to provide at least one of the four approaches to diversifying and enriching their students' opportunities to learn. Active learning is the approach favored by 17 of the 20. Their applications refer to "project-based experiences," "student-paced learning," "child-initiated learning," "hands-on experiences," "individual projects or research," and "outdoor educational experiences."

Sixteen schools appear committed to approaches that make learning relevant and applicable to their students' lives beyond the classroom. At least 10 of these schools plan to incorporate work experience or career preparation in their overall instructional approach. Life management or coping skills curricula will also be available to students in several schools.

Fourteen schools indicate that they intend to implement the instructional approach that their applications describe as "interdisciplinary," "thematic," or "integrated." Compared to the large numbers of schools opting for the other ways of diversifying and enriching students' opportunities to learn, only a handful (just four schools) discuss the use of group processes or cooperative learning.

Three schools plan to incorporate all four approaches—active, integrated, cooperative, and applied—that the *First Things First* framework predicts will enhance students' opportunities to learn. Six schools will use three of the four approaches. The rest intend to utilize only one or two of the instructional approaches that the framework recommends.

In terms of opportunities for learning the expected conduct and behavior, more than one-third of the Texas charter schools also plan to offer formal instruction in social skills. Descriptions of these courses in their applications typically emphasize the values of integrity, cooperation, and personal responsibility.

Opportunities to Perform in Charter School Designs

New Mexico. The applications of all charter schools in New Mexico include the intention either to implement or to explore nontraditional methods of evaluating student performance. Student portfolios, written narratives, exhibitions, and video presentations are among the alternative assessments the schools plan to use. Three of the four schools state their firm intention to implement alternative assessment techniques in addition to state-mandated student performance measures. One of these schools, Turquoise Trail Elementary School, will even develop, pilot, and possibly distribute statewide a performance-based assessment battery that could serve as an alternative to current standardized tests. The fourth New Mexico charter school pledges to explore the use of alternative assessments.

All charter schools in New Mexico include the intention either to implement or to explore nontraditional methods of evaluating student performance.

Texas. The majority of open-enrollment charter schools in Texas are opting for traditional standardized measures of student performance over alternative assessments. Applications for 13 schools refer to state-adopted assessments alone, especially the exit-level Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) exam. Five schools also plan to use the Texas Adult Basic Education Test for determining placement and measuring progress of potential or former dropouts. At least four other schools will administer the Iowa Test of Basic Skills in addition to TAAS.

Seven Texas charter schools buck this trend. Their applications include alternative assessments along with more traditional methods. The most frequently mentioned types of alternative assessments in their applications are student portfolios, formal exhibitions, demonstration or performance nights at school, creative projects, and oral and written demonstrations.

Opportunities to Be Recognized in Charter School Designs

New Mexico. Three of the four charter school applications in New Mexico make no reference to student opportunities for recognition or leadership. In contrast, Highland High School's application communicates a desire to "provide leadership opportunities for students of all abilities" and "provide recognition and incentives for student improvement." The application offers no detail on how the school intends to do it.

Texas. The six charter schools in Texas whose applications discuss student recognition at all intend to employ incentives that include schoolwide assemblies or public demonstration nights. Unique among these schools, Girls and Boys Prep Academy plans to recruit students who have satisfactory grades and excellent behavior as mentors to younger students. The applications of at least three other schools make reference to their intention to "recognize personal and group success," "provide positive reinforcements and rewards," or implement a "clear rewards system," but provide no detail.

Just one school describes the use of cash incentives to promote positive student behavior. Building Alternatives Charter School intends to provide monthly cash bonuses to students who have "perfect" attendance and make weekly needs-based stipends available to students with "good" attendance. No charter school in Texas mentioned the use of such incentives for academic achievement.

Recognizing student performance through leadership development is a feature of more than one-third of Texas charter school applications. These charter schools will either provide opportunities for students to assume leadership roles or will teach leadership skills. The proposed methods vary. For example, two schools plan to include students directly in all aspects of school governance and policymaking. Another school, Applied Technology Charter School, expects to develop student leadership skills through individual and group projects. Still another school, Renaissance Charter School, will conduct student leadership workshops during the week-long intercession between six-week quarters.

How Are Charter Schools Setting High Student Standards and Providing Rich Learning Opportunities?

In New Mexico and Texas charter schools' applications, the intention to set high standards for student performance is practically eclipsed by the intention to comply with state-mandated content and performance standards. Yet only four schools, all in Texas, attempt to interpret and clearly define what is to be expected of students. The rest of the applications leave unsaid how state standards will define more concretely what their charter school students show know and be able to do.

However, the applications of over half the charter schools signal the intention to communicate academic expectations to students. The applications of 13 schools in Texas and one in New Mexico discuss individual education plans or other strategies for this purpose.

Behavioral standards are strongly evident in Texas charter schools applications, but not at all in New Mexico. A solid majority of Texas schools plans to develop an explicit code of student conduct. But few of these schools indicate how the code will be communicated to students and whether students will play a role in its development or enforcement.

On the whole, charter schools in New Mexico and Texas intend to provide students with diverse and enriched opportunities to meet established expectations. Plans in both states contain plentiful evidence of active, integrated, and applied learning strategies, which represent three of the framework's four recommended approaches. At the same time, relatively few schools emphasize the fourth approach,

cooperative learning or group processes in the classroom. All four approaches to providing opportunities to learn were especially marked in New Mexico charter school applications, where all schools intend to integrate their curriculum and instruction, and half plan to use cooperative learning. By contrast, less than three-quarters of the Texas schools say they will integrate the curriculum, and only one-fifth mention using cooperative learning or other group processes.

Applications suggest that charter schools in both states are less likely to implement the framework's definition of opportunities for students to perform and be recognized. On the one hand, legislative mandates requiring participation in state assessment programs appear to limit charter schools' capacity or willingness to provide multiple, authentic opportunities to perform. On the other hand, the state, at least New Mexico, appears to be the source of encouragement for charter schools' use of alternative assessment techniques.[21] Not only are all New Mexico charter schools planning or exploring use of alternative assessment, but one school is also developing related tools that the state may disseminate to all its public schools. In contrast, most charter schools in Texas plan to rely heavily on standardized, traditional indicators of student performance.

Opportunities for students to gain recognition among peers for their achievements and talents appear to be relatively limited in charter schools in both states. A bare one-sixth of the schools—three in Texas and one in New Mexico—indicate plans to use incentives to promote student achievement. Students have a better chance, however, of developing and eventually utilizing leadership skills as a way to gain recognition, particularly in Texas schools. Yet even these opportunities are relatively rare. They will be available in fewer than half of Texas charter schools and in just one New Mexico charter school.

What Can Policymakers Do to Promote High, Clear, Fair Standards and Diverse, Enriched Opportunities to Learn in Charter Schools?

With respect to setting standards, New Mexico and Texas have already done much of the work. They have set expectations for student performance and placed them within charter school applications. What remains to be done is to help charter schools translate the standards into curriculum, and curriculum into lessons, and to make the standards living documents for students and families by embedding them clearly in syllabi, individual educational plans, and/or assessment rubrics. This help could take the form of state-initiated or state-funded banks of exemplars related to each standard, along with support for development and implementation. The support could be provided directly through established channels of professional development, technical assistance, and dissemination. Alternatively, support could be delivered through grassroots networks that government might nurture or facilitate.

With respect to designing diverse and enriched opportunities for students to learn, perform, and be recognized in charter schools, policymakers may simply need to adjust what has already been done in the area of assessment. Both New Mexico and Texas have created state assessment systems in which charter schools have amply demonstrated their intention to participate. To the extent these assessment systems embody authentic assessment and encourage applied, real-world learning, policy work in this area is done for now. If those assessment systems stifle multiple forms of assessment or divert charter schools from developing and using authentic assessment, however, more work is needed. Its long-standing waiver policy and support for the development of alternative assessment techniques make New Mexico a model for other states in this regard.

Opportunities for students to gain recognition among peers for their achievements and talents appear to be relatively limited in charter schools in both states.

Adult Engagement and Productivity

Adults in schools need both autonomy to make instructional decisions and support from peers on their team, the rest of the school, and the district to implement those decisions.

Adult Engagement and Productivity

The final three critical features for successful school-site reform shift *the First Things First* framework's focus from what schools can do for students to what they must do for adults. Clearly, increasing students' access to adults and giving them enriched opportunities to learn, perform, and be recognized require more of the adults in school. These critical features describe the conditions under which the adults can increase their capacity to meet students' needs. The conditions are adults taking collective responsibility for student outcomes, experiencing instructional autonomy and receiving support for improvement, and being able to direct resources to needs.

Taking collective responsibility means that adults in schools hold themselves accountable for student learning and achievement. A sense of mutual responsibility is strengthened when teams of adults who work with the same students reinforce each other's high expectations for delivering innovative, high-quality instruction. These teams also pay close attention to student results. Schools can promote the development of collective responsibility by building appropriate incentives—always connected to student performance—into the work lives of adults.

Autonomy and support come as a matched set. To provide students with meaningful learning experiences, adults in schools need *both* autonomy to make instructional decisions *and* support from peers on their team, the rest of the school, and the district to implement those decisions. According to IRRE, autonomy and support thrive in learning communities where educators are free to make instructional decisions based on their students' needs and where they can draw on the expertise of their colleagues and other professionals to enrich their own practice.

This final critical feature for adults concerns the acquisition and use of obtaining and deploying a variety of resources to address students' instructional and interpersonal needs. Resources may consist of money, time, people, and physical space. At issue are who controls or has input into available resources and how those resources are used.

Recognizing the Critical Features for Adults in Charter School Designs

Collective Responsibility. Charter school applications were examined for evidence that adults will bear responsibility for student performance. The review checked for signs that teams would be held accountable for student learning and looked for examples of accountability incentives. Incentives could be internal, such as time devoted to team discussions of student progress, time for cross-team reviews of student work, and clear indications of rewards for exceeding or consequences for falling short of expectations. External incentives included merit pay, reporting of teacher and school achievements to various publics, and other means of recognizing or sanctioning team productivity.

Instructional Autonomy and Supports. Charter school applications were examined for indications that teachers would have the authority to make instructional decisions and the time to meet, plan, and discuss instructional programming with their peers. Evidence was also sought on opportunities for teachers to participate in professional training and development.

Flexible Allocation of Resources. Charter school applications were reviewed for evidence of school and team governance structures that claim jurisdiction over the allocation of school resources and exercise this authority on the basis of students' needs. The focus here was not necessarily on the form of governance but on its function and the extent to which the adults most familiar with the needs of students—and those ultimately responsible for their performance—play a role in how resources are allocated.

Collective Responsibility in Charter School Designs

New Mexico and Texas. There is little evidence that charter schools in either New Mexico or Texas plan to take specific steps to encourage collective responsibility among the instructional staff. While some schools do intend to set aside time for teams of teachers to meet and plan for instruction, in most schools this time does not appear to be dedicated to tracking student progress, reviewing student work, or reviewing each other's work. Moreover, it is not clear whether these teams will serve as vehicles for providing peer support.

Further, no charter school application reveals plans to implement external incentives, such as merit pay, additional instructional resources, public recognition or other sorts of public reporting.

It should be noted, however, that one school in each state did appear to be moving in this direction. In New Mexico, Highland High School plans to form teams of teachers who will be responsible for integrating the curriculum and regularly monitoring and evaluating individual student progress. And in Texas, teams of teachers at Building Alternatives Charter School will be responsible for assessing individual students' academic and social needs, and will collectively review student progress every three weeks.

Autonomy and Supports in Charter School Designs

New Mexico. Three of the four charter schools in New Mexico plan to implement both instructional autonomy and support for their teaching staffs. For example, teaching faculty at Turquoise Trail Elementary bear the sole responsibility for developing curricula, along with assessment methodologies and evaluations, as long as they are compatible with the school's mission and students' needs. The application indicates that school has a five-year plan for professional development. Teachers (and parents and students who serve on standing committees) receive ongoing training to help them "participate in shared decisionmaking, ensure sound sequential planning, and model and explain the integrated curriculum." Only one of New Mexico's schools provided no evidence in its charter application of plans for teachers' instructional autonomy. But this school, like the others, does intend to furnish instructional support.

Texas. Fifteen of the 20 open-enrollment charter schools in Texas plan to provide their instructional staffs with either autonomy or support. At least eight have committed to providing teachers with both.

There is about an even split in the number of schools planning to provide teachers with instructional autonomy *or* instructional support. Eleven schools state they will grant teachers autonomy to make a variety of critical instructional decisions, including student placement, curriculum design, the organization of interdisciplinary instruction, and the coordination of learning activities. Twelve schools indicate their plans for providing support. These schools intend to ensure that teachers have time to meet, plan, and discuss instructional issues with their peers, as well as access to conferences, in-service training, and other professional development activities they might need to implement new instructional strategies successfully.

Flexible Allocation of Resources in Charter School Designs

New Mexico. All four schools in New Mexico plan to adopt a school-based management approach. Two of these schools have been chosen to pilot such an approach for their districts. In all four schools, the approach includes the establishment of a management council whose purview includes diverse aspects of school decisionmaking. Members

There is little evidence that charter schools in either New Mexico or Texas plan to take specific steps to encourage collective responsibility among the instructional staff.

of these councils tend to be teachers and other staff, and often include parents, students, community members, and/or union representatives as well.

Although New Mexico charter schools intend to involve those closest to students in school decisionmaking, there are *de jure* limits on their budgetary authority and thereby limits on school flexibility for allocating resources. The law requires charter schools to submit budgets to their local school board for approval. Funds flow through districts to charter schools, and the district is allowed to retain some monies for expenses related to monitoring the school's budget. Moreover, all four charter schools in New Mexico will further limit their *de facto* budgetary control by contracting with their local districts to manage their financial affairs.

Texas. The 18 Texas applications that specify how their charter school will be governed and managed describe two different arrangements for allocating resources.[24] One arrangement gives authority over management and resource allocation to a school-based council or board that includes faculty representatives and other stakeholders. The other allows the school's sponsoring entity to exercise direct influence on the management process, including the allocation of resources. Under both arrangements, the governing body may or may not solicit and consider input from members of the broader school community.

The most common approach to school governance, management, and resource allocation is the first arrangement. Eleven schools have adopted this plan. In these schools, faculty—and often parents, students, and community members—are represented on a school council that is charged with making all critical school decisions. At least seven of these schools will also form advisory councils, conduct focus groups, or solicit input from school representatives to gather additional information about staff needs.

Seven schools plan to use the second governance arrangement. In these schools, decisionmakers are the sponsor's board of directors or members of the sponsoring entity, a subcommittee of the board of directors in conjunction with other school representatives, or a school-based council, some or all of whose members are appointed by the sponsor's board of directors. Four of these schools, however, will have advisory councils or school-based committees that provide input and have at least some indirect influence on school management and resource allocation.

The governance structure in two of them is particularly complex. For example, Renaissance Charter School's board of trustees will consist of four members elected by school employees and parents, with the remainder elected by the sponsoring entity's board of directors. In addition, there is a site-based management committee on which teachers are required to participate, and then there are multiple advisory councils for parents, postsecondary, and business/industry partners. The budget will be generated by requests from those who are directly involved in the use of the funds, and it will be adopted jointly by the school's board of trustees and the site-based management committee.

How Are Charter Schools Fostering Adult Engagement and Productivity?

To what extent are New Mexico and Texas charter schools planning to implement the working conditions for adults that will lead to successful school-site reform and improved student outcomes? Specifically, in what ways are these charter schools creating conditions of collective responsibility, instructional autonomy and support, and control over the allocation of resources, as identified in the *First Things First* framework?

Overall, there is little evidence that teachers in New Mexico and Texas charter schools will formally assume collective

responsibility for their students' performance. Few charter school applications suggest that teachers will meet for the primary purpose of tracking student progress or reviewing student work. In addition, teachers' meetings described in the applications do not appear set up for promoting peer support or for addressing concerns about individual students. Moreover, these schools seem to offer teachers few incentives, material or otherwise, for holding themselves responsible for student performance. Not surprisingly, there are no indications that teachers will play any role in holding themselves or their peers accountable for students' success.

In contrast, charter school applications in both states indicate that teachers will have the autonomy and support necessary to implement instructional innovations. The degree of autonomy and supports to implement change varies across schools, however. Three-quarters of charter schools in New Mexico and nearly half of those in Texas plan to grant teachers the autonomy to make critical decisions regarding instruction. Applications for these same schools and another one-fourth of Texas charter schools show support for the change process by encouraging professional development and training, and by scheduling meetings for teachers to plan and coordinate instructional programs.

Despite taking progressive steps in providing supports, sponsoring entities in a number of these charter schools have reserved decisionmaking roles for themselves that effectively relegate teachers to relatively traditional roles and responsibilities. Furthermore, few charter school organizers in either state have taken the step of encouraging teachers to take real responsibility for their performance and that of their students. Even with a mandate for increased school accountability and (in Texas, at least) total autonomy with regard to personnel decisions, charter schools so far fail to offer the kinds of incentives and supports that will motivate teachers to assume collective responsibility for student performance.

Charter schools in Texas appear to offer more options than in New Mexico for management arrangements that will lead to flexible allocation of resources. A major difference is that Texas open-enrollment charter schools are not subject to the legal constraints like those in New Mexico requiring approval of charter school budgets—and consequently, resource allocation—by the local school district. Ironically, while charter schools in New Mexico appear more likely than in Texas to involve those closest to the students in all aspects of school decisionmaking, they ultimately have less authority over an important component of successful reform, namely how resources are allocated.

What Can Policymakers Do to Increase Adult Engagement and Productivity?

Policymakers in New Mexico and Texas seem to have succeeded in encouraging or permitting charter schools to develop professional autonomy and supports, which together comprise one of the *First Things First* framework's three critical features for adults. It may well be that this critical feature, especially supports like in-service and other forms of professional development, have become conventional in most public schools. Or it may be that charter school legislation, which is often based at least in part on the perceived need for greater professional autonomy, communicated this motivation clearly, and that it was successfully translated into departmental processes and procedures, and from there into charter school applications. It may also be that charter schools in these states have managed to capture both the letter and the spirit of charter school legislation on this point. In any case, policymakers in New Mexico and Texas appear to have enabled their states' charter schools to embody these conditions for adults that are instrumental in producing school site reform and improved student outcomes.

However, policymakers may want to do more to promote the two remaining critical features, collective responsibility for

Ironically, while charter schools in New Mexico appear to involve those closest to students in all aspects of school decisionmaking, they ultimately have less authority over how resources are allocated.

Policymakers may want to do more to promote collective responsibility for student performance and flexible allocation of resources.

student performance and flexible allocation of resources. State procedures and guidelines for charter schools may need to emphasize them more than they currently do. For example, charter applications could be amended so that organizers must address how they intend to hold adults accountable for student performance. State policymakers can also ascertain what if any impediments are keeping charter schools from implementing these conditions, and design appropriate remedies.

The rarity of collective responsibility in charter schools (and in most public schools), suggests that charter school organizers, boards, and staff can benefit from a more in-depth understanding of what a schoolwide orientation to improving performance means and what practices support it. State and local policymakers can extend to charter schools appropriate technical assistance and staff development. The focus should be on data-driven instructional planning and methods for collective reviews of student work and program revisions.

Unlike most public schools, however, charter schools already have a built-in incentive for collective responsibility: the need to show sufficient student performance and other outcomes for charter renewal after a specified period of time. Policymakers might consider shorter-term strategies of offering rewards and sanctions to schools (not individuals) for significant changes in student performance. If this strategy is pursued, policymakers must take care that judgments about school performance are based on valid indicators and promote an integrated system of reform-inducing conditions, such as the *First Things First* framework.

Similarly, it can be argued that even arrangements in which charter school sponsors instead of teachers determine how resources are allocated nonetheless place such decisions at the individual school level and away from distant school bureaucracies. The underlying object is ensuring that adequate resources can be applied to students' needs in a timely way. Policymakers in states such as New Mexico might want to revisit provisions in charter school and other legislation that intentionally or unintentionally stand in the way of the flexible allocation and delivery of resources in charter schools.

Reconsidering Charter School Design

Features that will ultimately produce improved educational outcomes for students are distributed unevenly across charter schools in the two states. Features that require significant structural changes are less evident in school designs.

Reconsidering Charter School Design

When it comes to producing better results for students, charter schools—at least theoretically—have an edge over many traditional public schools. Unlike many public schools, charter schools have an explicit mandate to improve educational outcomes for students through innovation rather than regulation. In addition to this express mission, as schools of choice, charter schools have the commitment of educators, parents, and students that is essential for successful school change and improvement. But perhaps most important, charter schools also have the means—greater freedom and autonomy than other public schools—to create and/or recreate school conditions to achieve their goals. Thus, charter schools are in a unique and prime position to design the very best educational settings for their students.

The *First Things First* framework was designed as a tool to help educators examine the conditions for students and adults that would constitute meaningful reform in *any* educational setting. Grounded in education research and practice, the framework outlines an interrelated set of seven critical features or school conditions believed to be critical to student success. The framework functions not as a specific model or program for school reform but as a guide for educators who are restructuring school conditions to achieve better results. While the framework focuses on conditions that are largely the responsibility and under the control of educators at the school site, they also acknowledge the very real obstacles that all schools face when challenged to change.

This inquiry applied the *First Things First* framework to charter schools in New Mexico and Texas. The idea was to discover how the designs of these charter schools incorporate the features that research and practice suggest will ultimately produce improved educational outcomes for students.

Overall, the analysis finds that these features are distributed unevenly across charter schools in the two states. While some elements of the framework are common in charter school designs, other elements appear in none or only a few. Still others are more prevalent in one state than another. No single school design in New Mexico or Texas incorporates the entire set of critical features.

The two critical features of school reform found most commonly in the charter school designs are creating diverse and enriched opportunities for students to learn, and providing adults in the school with greater instructional autonomy and support. They embody the most widespread and generally accepted reform initiatives in public schools of the last decade—hands-on learning, teacher professionalism, and site-based management. The prevalence of these features in charter school designs, however, may be more than merely a function of the fact that they are familiar and widely acknowledged as good practice. They also represent the kinds of changes that are relatively easy to make. Neither feature requires fundamental restructuring or the significant reallocation of human and financial resources, and information about implementation is readily available.

Features that require significant structural changes are less evident in charter school designs. For example, conditions that promote better relationships between students and adults—such as lower student/adult ratios and continuity of care—but that also require major change in school practice rarely appear in the designs of charter schools, especially in New Mexico. None of the applications for the charter schools which converted from existing public schools in that state contain explicit plans for significantly lowering student/adult ratios during core instructional periods. Yet, while many Texas charter schools do plan to have student/adult ratios that better the standard set by the state, a majority have sufficient numbers of professional staff in their buildings to lower

student/adult ratios during core instructional periods even further. Their failure to tap this unused capacity may be attributable to the restructuring of adult roles and relationships it would require.

Likewise, few charter school designs show evidence of the altering conventional structures in order to provide students with continuous access to adult guidance and support. New Mexico has a higher proportion than Texas of schools planning to provide students with continuity of care, but in all it amounts to only seven charter schools in both states.

Least evident in New Mexico and Texas charter school designs is collective responsibility. This critical feature requires relatively modest structural changes but demands a fundamental redefinition of roles for adults in schools. This feature, which encourages adults not only to hold themselves responsible for the performance of their students but also to hold each other accountable for improving student performance, is not clearly evident in any charter school design in either state.

What Does This Mean for Practitioners and Policymakers?

The outright absence or relatively weak presence in charter school designs of some features that the *First Things First* framework identifies as necessary and sufficient for improving student outcomes says something about the challenges facing not just charter schools but all schools attempting reform. The critical features that are less robust or missing altogether are the most difficult to implement for several reasons. They are less familiar to educators and the public, and they deviate the most from standard practice. For those reasons alone they are more likely to encounter resistance. But even if these difficulties are overcome, other and perhaps more significant difficulties remain. Implementation of these features demands reorganization of instructional time, space, and staff. Moreover, it requires a redefinition of roles, relationships, and responsibilities that asks educators collectively to make a deep personal and professional investment in their students' performance.

If charter schools are to model school-site reform as well as catalyze the entire public education system, then they must be designed for optimal student success. Practitioners and policymakers both can contribute to ensuring that charter school designs incorporate best practice like the *First Things First* framework's critical features. Practitioners, first and foremost, must seek and use reliable information concerning school-site reform. They must also examine their own school-site designs to ensure that they incorporate the features that are most likely to have a direct and positive impact on student achievement.

For their part, policymakers have a responsibility to review and revise charter school legislation, guidelines, and procedures in their states. One aspect of this review is changing language or provisions that deter charter school organizers from exploring effective educational and administrative strategies. Specifically, policymakers might reexamine waiver policies to make sure they are sufficiently broad, review certification provisions to raise the proportion of degreed adults in charter school buildings, revisit assessment standards to ensure that they are keyed to multiple, authentic assessments, and (in New Mexico) reposition budgetary control and oversight to increase the authority of school-site personnel. Policymakers might also consider short-term rewards and sanctions for student performance in charter schools.

The other aspect of this review of legislation, guidelines, and procedures is to introduce ways of encouraging charter school organizers to include sound educational practices in their school-site designs. Specifically, policymakers can adjust charter applications so they direct applicants' attention to

Practitioners and policymakers can apply a framework grounded in education research and practice during the operational phase of charter schools.

critical features. Policymakers can also make technical assistance and staff development available to charter school organizers, boards of trustees, and personnel. Technical assistance could include developing and providing access to relevant materials, and facilitating the creation of networks among charter school developers and operators. Professional development—and follow-up technical assistance—might particularly focus on such topics as team teaching, curricula and lessons keyed to particular state standards, data-driven instructional planning, and alternative assessment, including methods for collectively calibrating and monitoring student work.

Practitioners and policymakers can continue applying the *First Things First* framework–or any other comprehensive synthesis that is grounded in education research and practice–during the operational phase of charter schools. The framework can be used to assess actual conditions in charter schools and can guide ongoing efforts to refine and redesign them. The framework could also provide a structure for field-based research on best practice among charter schools within a single state or across several states. This application would not only enable the participating practitioners to learn from one another, but would also produce new learnings for others who operate and regulate charter schools.

Advocates have suggested that the success of charter schools is largely a function of autonomy: the more autonomy states grant charter schools, the better their chances for success. This inquiry has shown that enhanced autonomy in New Mexico and Texas has not uniformly produced charter school designs with features that education research and practice suggest are necessary and sufficient for student success. By the same token, this inquiry has shown that current regulations and guidelines for charter school design do not necessarily produce designs that incorporate those features either. The purposeful development of a knowledge base about school-site reform, grounded in what is known about good educational practice, may also be necessary.

The ultimate success of charter schools will lie in their ability to improve student outcomes. Attaining this goal depends not only on their autonomy with regard to school-site design and implementation, but also on the extent to which charter schools use the very best knowledge about optimal school conditions for students and adults. This inquiry has described a framework that embodies this kind of knowledge, and actions in the policy arena that will promote its use.

Appendices

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Appendix A: The Legislative Context

The extent to which charter schools in any state may be successful models of school-site reform should be examined in close relationship to the legislative context of that particular state. In each state, the context created by state law and regulation is critical to how charter schools are defined and for what purposes.

New Mexico. With the passage of House Bill 888 in 1993, New Mexico became the third state in the nation to enact charter school legislation. That same year, the state board of education awarded mini-grants to 10 schools to explore the feasibility of converting to charter status. The law, however, authorized the establishment of only five charter schools, with each charter valid for a period not to exceed five years. Four schools converted to charter status in 1994, and a fifth school received charter status in 1996.

New Mexico's charter school law is viewed as "weak" legislation, that is, it does not afford charter schools the high level of autonomy and freedom implicit in the charter school concept. Charter schools in New Mexico are not automatically exempt from state and local education codes; they must apply for waivers to gain regulatory relief on a rule-by-rule basis. In addition, only existing public schools in New Mexico can apply for charter status. Those approved must remain legally part of their local districts and must limit their enrollment to students residing within the district boundaries. State and local money flows through the local district to the charter school, and the district retains oversight authority with regard to charter school budgets.

Before the authorization of charter schools, New Mexico already had a number of school reform initiatives in place throughout the state. In 1990, the state legislature amended Senate Bill 34 to promote a collaborative school improvement program. This allowed local school boards to request state waivers from the public school code to experiment with a variety of alternative learning conditions, including changes in the length of the school day, staffing patterns, subject areas, and student assessment. Since 1989, several public schools across the state have also been involved with Re:Learning, a collaborative effort of the Coalition of Essential Schools and the Education Commission of the States. Re:Learning works with states and regional networks to promote the design of teaching and learning environments that reflect the Coalition of Essential Schools' Nine Common Principles. As a result of these initiatives, three of the four initial charter schools in New Mexico began exploring and implementing alternative instructional methods and assessment before they converted to charter status.

Texas. In 1995, Senate Bill 1 set forth three charter school options in Texas newly revised education code, designed to return control to the local district and school levels. In contrast to New Mexico's law, the Texas legislation is assessed as "strong," because of the inclusion of an open-enrollment charter school option. This charter school opportunity has attracted considerable attention from potential charter school organizers in the state and observers of the movement across the nation.

Senate Bill 1 authorized the creation of up to 20 open-enrollment charter schools statewide. Open-enrollment charter schools are approved by the state board of education and can be sponsored by any private or public institution of higher education, nonprofit organization, or governmental entity. Enrollment is open to any student across the state, but the charter school is not required to provide transportation. Seventeen of the 20 open-enrollment schools granted charter status by the state board of education opened in fall 1996; the remaining three schools expect to open for the 1997–1998 school year.

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Open-enrollment charter schools are automatically exempted from most state and local education codes, although the schools are required to adopt the state's content and performance standards and to participate in the public school accountability program. The schools do not remain under the authority of a local school board, and they receive their money directly from the state and from the districts from which their students transfer. Moreover, charter school organizers have full authority to make decisions regarding the school's educational program, personnel, and budget.

In Texas, all open-enrollment schools are technically classified as newly formed because none have previously existed as public schools. Only nine schools, however, represent educational programs built from the ground up. Eight of these are sponsored by nonprofit organizations and one by an institution of higher education. The remaining 11 applications approved for charter status were submitted by existing educational programs, previously funded through private sources and/or federal, state, and local grants. Before obtaining charter status, seven of these programs operated as alternative educational options for students who had already dropped out of school or were at risk of dropping out. Most of these programs are designed to help students obtain their high school diploma or GED, as well as relevant job and life skills. The remaining four schools operated as private schools before becoming charter schools.

In addition to open-enrollment charter schools, Senate Bill 1 permitted the establishment of an unlimited number of "campus or program" charters at existing public schools across the state. These Texas charter schools have significantly less autonomy than open-enrollment charter schools and remain under the authority of their local school boards. Senate Bill 1 also allowed for the creation of "home rule" school district charters, which are designed to give individual school districts greater autonomy and freedom from state regulation. To date, it appears that few schools or districts are pursuing these other two charter options.

Appendix B: New Mexico Charter Schools Descriptive Information

Charter/Location	Grades	Enrollment	Themes and Program Design
Broad Horizons Educational Center Portales, New Mexico Geographical area served: suburban and rural	9-12; GED	133	Designed to serve students 15 to 50 years of age, Broad Horizons Educational Center is an alternative school that operates as a dropout recovery program and an early intervention program for at-risk students. The program includes self-paced, computer assisted academic instruction, employability training, and a social services component. Its learning environment is based on the Nine Common Principles of Re: Learning and the Coalition of Essential Schools.
Highland High School Albuquerque Public Schools Geographical area served: urban	9-12	2235	Highland High School is designed to meet the needs of its ethnically and economically diverse student population, with the goal of encouraging students to become "lifelong learners, reach their potential, and achieve excellence." The educational program includes a thematic cross-discipline curriculum, computer technology, leadership opportunities for students of all abilities, mentoring opportunities, and family and community partnerships.
Taylor Middle School Los Ranchos de Albuquerque Geographical area served: suburban	6-8	1081	The educational program at Taylor Middle School is based on a series of school initiatives designed to enhance student learning and provide support for the school's restructuring efforts. Curriculum initiatives currently focus on proficiency, closing the technology gap between school and the world of work, and implementing various types of interdisciplinary instructional teams. Support initiatives focus on ways to more meaningfully connect home, school, and community; promote school self-governance; and encourage partnerships with area businesses and educational institutions.
Turquoise Trail Elementary School Santa Fe Public Schools Geographical area served: suburban	K-6	475	Dedicated to the principles of holistic, hands-on, innovative education, Turquoise Trail Elementary School follows an alternative child-centered curriculum that is developed and continually refined by the school's own faculty. The educational program incorporates multi-age student groupings, cooperative learning activities, and alternative assessment strategies.

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Appendix C: Texas Open-Enrollment Charter Schools Descriptive Information

Charter/Location	Grades	Enrollment	Themes and Program Design
Academy of Transitional Studies County District #178-801 Corpus Christi, Texas Geographical area served: urban	6-8 and GED	Initial: 30 Projected: 200	The Academy of Transitional Studies is designed for students who have fallen behind academically or present discipline problems in traditional school settings. Students have the option to study and prepare for a GED or to improve academic performance on grade-level work and return to their respective schools.
American Institute for Learning County District #227-801 Austin, Texas Geographical area served: urban and suburban	9-12	Initial: 100 Projected: 250	American Institute for Learning (AIL) is designed as an innovative dropout recovery program for youth 16 through 21 years of age. The AIL Charter School will operate year-round and lead to a certificate of mastery for students who complete the program.
Applied Technology Charter School County District #101-807 Houston, Texas Geographical area served: urban and suburban	K-12	Initial: 200 Projected: 500	Sponsored by The College of Technology at the University of Houston, Applied Technology Charter School is designed as a demonstration school. The instructional program will include a constructivist approach to personal and intellectual development, problem solving through scientific inquiry, technology education, and the development of leadership skills.
Blessed Sacrament Academy Second Chance High School County District #015-801 San Antonio, Texas Geographical area served: urban and suburban	9-12	Initial: 150 Projected: 180	The mission of Blessed Sacrament Academy Second Chance High School is to provide quality academic skill development for "highly at-risk" students. In addition to academic reinforcement, the school emphasizes personal counseling and positive social interactions for students through community involvement and mentorship programs.

Continued ➡

Texas Open-Enrollment Charter Schools Descriptive Information *Continued*

Charter/Location	Grades	Enrollment	Themes and Program Design
Building Alternatives Charter School County District #015-802 San Antonio, Texas Geographical area served: urban	9-12	Initial: 75 Projected: 100	Modeled on the nationally recognized "Youthbuild San Antonio" program, Building Alternatives Charter School offers remedial instruction and an employment-based vocational curriculum to students who have dropped out of school. The school offers three consecutive academic terms, each consisting of a 12-week intensive education program, and provides up to 120 hours of follow-up support for all graduating students.
Cypress Lodge Charter School County District #155-801 Jefferson, Texas Geographical area served: rural	9-12	Initial: 24 Projected: 48	Cypress Lodge Charter School offers a nine- to 12-month program for dropouts 15 through 17 years of age. The school provides a student-centered living and learning environment that combines outdoor education, challenge initiatives, and classical studies.
Genesis Charter High School County District #057-802 Dallas, Texas Geographical area served: urban	7-12	Initial: 200 Projected: 300	The educational program at Genesis Charter High School has been designed to emphasize academic excellence, high achievement, intellectual and personal integrity, and participation in community life. Students in all grades are taught on an individual basis according to their personal interests, needs, and goals. Both leadership development and community service are required for students at all grade levels.
George I. Sanchez Charter School County District #101-804 Houston, Texas Geographical area served: urban	9-12	Initial: 375 Projected: 450	George I. Sanchez Charter High School is designed exclusively for at-risk students in the Houston area. The goal of the charter school is to produce productive citizens who are academically prepared, culturally enriched, economically competitive, and technologically advanced.

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Charter/Location	Grades	Enrollment	Themes and Program Design
Girls and Boys Prep Academy County District #101-805 Houston, Texas Geographical area served: urban and suburban	6-12	Initial: 200 Projected: 400	Students will receive instruction in single-gender classrooms, be required to wear uniforms, and be expected to maintain a professional appearance at all times. The school will be strictly academic with no competitive sports. A magnet academy will offer tailored instruction for students interested in fine arts, foreign languages, and mathematics.
Medical Center Charter Schools, Inc. County District #101-801 Houston, Texas Geographical area served: urban	K-5	Initial: 55 Projected: 110	This elementary school is designed to serve children of employees of the Texas Medical Center. The charter school will use the Montessori method of instruction, feature computer centers in every classroom, and offer foreign language instruction in French, Spanish, and Latin.
The North Hills School County District #057-803 Irving, Texas Geographical area served: suburban	5-8	Initial: 216 Projected: 504	The North Hills School will offer an educational program developed by Switzerland's International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO). The IBO program stresses rigorous academic study and the equally important development of life skills, discipline, and a sense of responsibility.
One-Stop Multiservice Charter School County District #108-801 Mission, Texas Geographical area served: rural	9-12	Initial: 80 Projected: 200	Operated by the Information Referral Resource Assistance, Inc. board of directors, this charter school is designed to serve students who are economically disadvantaged, school dropouts or at risk of dropping out, expelled from school, pregnant or parenting, of limited English proficiency, or migrants. Instruction in core subjects will be individualized, self-paced, and supported by technology.

Continued ➡

Texas Open-Enrollment Charter Schools Descriptive Information *Continued*

Charter/Location	Grades	Enrollment	Themes and Program Design
Raul Yzaquirre's School for Success County District #101-806 Houston, Texas Geographical area served: urban	7-8	Initial: 100 Projected: 200	Designed to meet the needs of at-risk youth, Raul Yzaquirre's School for Success will feature small, self-contained classrooms and direct-instruction methods that are effective with at-risk students. The academic day will consist of 7.5 hours of instruction, and students will have the opportunity to participate in after-school activities until 5:30 p.m.
Renaissance Charter School County District #057-801 Irving, Texas Geographical area served: suburban	7-12	Initial: 280 Projected: 560	Renaissance Charter School is designed to provide a sound academic and career-focused education. In grades seven and nine, students will be provided with teachers who will remain with them for a two-year period. The school's calendar provides for a one-week intercession after each six-week grading period during which students will receive academic remediation, leadership training, or internships with local businesses.
Seashore Learning Center County District #178-802 Corpus Christi, Texas Geographical area served: suburban	Pre-K-6	Initial: 32/62 Projected: 300	The Seashore Learning Center will offer a child-centered curriculum designed to foster individual interest and understanding, value cultural and linguistic diversity, and recognize the social nature of learning. The educational program will feature flexible multi-age grouping of students and use computers as an integrated instructional tool.
SER-NIÑOS County District #101-802 Houston, Texas Geographical area served: urban	Pre-K-4	Initial: 110 Projected: 125	Designed to serve the needs of low-income elementary students whose first language is not English, SER-NIÑOS plans to help students attain educational success by working with their entire families to alleviate factors that create hardship and threaten family well-being. The charter school will use child-initiated learning, as well as teacher-directed instruction and individual and group work to foster intellectual and social development.

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Charter/Location	Grades	Enrollment	Themes and Program Design
Texas Academy of Excellence County District #227-802 Austin, Texas Geographical area served: urban	Pre-K-1 (year 1) expanding to Pre-K-5	Initial: 120 Projected: 216	The educational program at the Texas Academy of Excellence will be Waldorf-inspired, modeled on the research of Austrian scientist Rudolph Steiner. Learning is believed to take place in different developmental stages rather than according to grade level, and students are encouraged to relate what they learn to their own personal experiences. The charter school will initially serve students in the early and middle childhood stages (prekindergarten, kindergarten, and first grade) and will add one level each year.
Texas Can! Academy Charter School County District #057-804 Dallas, Texas Geographical area served: urban	9-12	Initial: 200 Projected: 600	A year-round charter school, Texas Can! Academy will serve students who have dropped out or are at risk of dropping out of school. Students will have the opportunity to complete their education through a computer-assisted program of basic education, TAAS preparation, GED training, and comprehensive employability training.
Waco Charter School County District #161-801 Waco, Texas Geographical area served: urban	K-5	Initial: 180 Projected: 360	Waco Charter School will develop individualized learning plans for each student. The instructional program will stress the use of cooperative learning models and other approaches designed to help students build positive self-concepts and the motivation to learn.
West Houston Charter School County District #101-803 Houston, Texas Geographical area served: urban and suburban	7-9	Initial: 120 Projected: 160	Teachers at West Houston Charter School will use a multisensory teaching method that responds to the individual learning style of each student. The school expects to attract a significant number of special education students.

Critical Features for Students in New Mexico Charter School Applications

Charter School	Lower Student/Adult Ratio	Continuity of Care	Standards		Opportunities				
					LEARN		PERFORM	BE RECOGNIZED	
			Academic	Behavior	Academic	Behavior		Academic	Behavior
Broad Horizons Educational Center	Cl 8:1 Sch 10:1	●	●		●		●		
Highland High School	Cl 25:1 Sch 16:1	●	●		●		●	●	●
Taylor Middle School	Cl 25:1 Sch 15:1		●		●		●		
Turquoise Trail Elementary School	Cl 22:1 Sch 13:1		●		●	●	●		

Critical Features for Adults in New Mexico Charter School Applications

Charter School	Collective Responsibility	Instructional Autonomy and Supports		Flexible Allocation of Resources
		Autonomy	Supports	
Broad Horizons Educational Center		●	●	●
Highland High School		●	●	●
Taylor Middle School			●	●
Turquoise Trail Elementary School		●	●	●

Critical Features for Students in Texas Charter School Applications

Charter School	Lower Student/Adult Ratio	Continuity of Care	Standards		Opportunities				
					LEARN,		PERFORM	BE RECOGNIZED	
			Academic	Behavior	Academic	Behavior		Academic	Behavior
Academy of Transitional Studies	Cl 5:1 Sch 4:1		●		●				
American Institute for Learning	Cl 18:1 Sch 5:1	●	●		●				
Applied Technology Charter School	Cl NA Sch NA		●		●				●
Blessed Sacrament Academy	Cl 14:1 Sch 14:1	●	●		●	●		●	
Building Alternatives Charter School	Cl 13:1 Sch 8:1	●	●	●	●		●	●	●
Cypress Lodge Charter School	Cl 4:1 Sch 3:1	●	●		●			●	
Genesis Charter High School	Cl 20:1 Sch 13:1		●	●	●				●
George I. Sanchez Charter School	Cl 22:1 Sch 14:1		●	●	●				●
Girls and Boys Prep Academy	Cl 19:1 Sch 9:1		●	●	●	●		●	●
Medical Charter Schools, Inc.	Cl 22:1 Sch 6:1		●	●	●	●			
North Hills School	Cl NA Sch NA	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	
One-Stop Multiservice Charter School	Cl 18:1 Sch 2:1	●	●	●	●	●	●		
Raul Yzaquirre's School for Success	Cl 18:1 Sch 3:1	●	●	●	●	●			●
Renaissance Charter School	Cl 16:1 Sch 10:1	●	●	●	●	●	●		●

Continued

Critical Features for Students in Texas Charter School Applications *Continued*

Charter School	Lower Student/Adult Ratio	Continuity of Care	Standards		Opportunities					
					LEARN		PERFORM	BE RECOGNIZED	
			Academic	Behavior	Academic	Behavior		Academic	Behavior
Seasl ve Learning Center Charter School	Cl 16:1 Sch 13:1		●		●		●		
SER-NINOS	Cl 13:1 Sch 10:1		●	●	●	●			
Texas Academy of Excellence	Cl 8:1 Sch 8:1	●	●		●				
Texas Can! Academy Charter School	Cl NA Sch NA	●	●		●	●			
Waco Charter School	Cl 20:1 Sch 16:1		●	●	●		●	●	
West Houston Charter School	Cl 10:1 Sch 9:1	●	●		●		●		●

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Critical Features for Adults in Texas Charter School Applications

Charter School	Collective Responsibility	Instructional Autonomy and Supports		Flexible Allocation of Resources
		Autonomy	Supports	
Academy of Transitional Studies		●	●	●
American Institute for Learning			●	●
Applied Technology Charter School		●	●	●
Blessed Sacrament Academy			●	●
Building Alternatives Charter School		●		●
Cypress Lodge Charter School				●
Genesis Charter High School				●
George I. Sanchez Charter School		●	●	●
Girls and Boys Prep Academy			●	●
Medical Charter Schools, Inc.		●	●	NA
North Hills School		●		●
One-Stop Multiservice Charter School		●	●	●
Raul Yzaquirre's School for Success				●
Renaissance Charter School		●	●	●

Continued

Critical Features for Adults in Texas Charter School Applications *Continued*

Charter School	Collective Responsibility	Instructional Autonomy and Supports		Flexible Allocation of Resources
		Autonomy	Supports	
Seashore Learning Center				NA
SER-NIÑOS				●
Texas Academy of Excellence		●		●
Texas Can! Academy Charter School			●	●
Waco Charter School		●	●	●
West Houston Charter School		●	●	●

Notes and References

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Notes and References

Notes

1 Because of time considerations, the analysis is limited to the applications of the four charter schools in New Mexico submitted and approved in 1994, and applications for the 20 open-enrollment charter schools in Texas submitted and approved in the spring of 1996. Charters for a fifth New Mexico school and three Louisiana schools were also awarded in 1996, but the final approval of these applications came too late in the year to include them in this analysis.

2 A minimum of additional data was collected from charter school operators as to student demographics and clarification on some of the submitted applications.

3 Rankings are reported in the Center for Education Reform's (1997) Charter School Survey 1996-1997: Analysis, March 1998.

4 New Mexico's applications do not require this information because charter schools remain part of their local school districts and are governed by the same regulations unless they are granted waivers on a rule-by-rule basis.

5 See Meister, 1998, in the Aspen Institute's Roundtable on Comprehensive Community Initiatives for Children and Families.

6 For a more complete and comprehensive explanation of the framework and its evaluation component, see IRRE (1997) *First Things First: A Framework for Successful School-Site Reform*, a White Paper prepared for the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation.

7 Table 2 in IRRE's White Paper (1997) crosswalks the *First Things First* elements with a total of nine reform initiatives. The comparison includes Henry Levin's Accelerated Schools Project, the School District of Philadelphia's Career Academies and Children Achieving agenda, Eric Schaps' Child Development Project, James Comer's School Development Project, and Fred Newmann's Successful School Restructuring effort, in addition to those already mentioned.

8 IRRE, 1997, p. 10.

9 Ibid., p. 31.

10 The indicators are drawn from IRRE (1997) and the author's personal communication with Dr. James Connell, IRRE's co-founder and director.

11 IRRE, 1997, pp. 27-28.

12 Ibid., p. 4.

13 Ibid., p. 39.

14 IRRE, 1997, p. 35.

15 Most elementary school students spend core instructional periods with a single teacher, while most middle and high school students change classes and teachers every 40 to 45 minutes during the day.

16 Block scheduling increases the length of instructional periods throughout the day, providing students more time to develop a deeper understanding of the subject and greater access to adult guidance and support during the instructional period.

17 All calculations were rounded to the nearest whole number.

18 Because of the length of time that had elapsed since the New Mexico charter school applications had been submitted, actual enrollment and personnel figures were obtained from the schools by phone.

19 In most cases, Texas enrollment and personnel figures were obtained directly from the charter schools' applications. When figures were not available, the schools were contacted directly by phone. In three instances, school officials were unable to provide enrollment and/or personnel projections.

20 In 14 of 17 Texas schools, the average percent difference between classroom and schoolwide ratios is lower than in New Mexico charter schools. This statement is based on an average difference of 39 percent between New Mexico charter school classroom ratios and schoolwide ratios, excluding the much smaller, outlying 20 percent difference of Broad Horizons Educational Center. When all four New Mexico schools are included in the calculation, the average difference in ratios drops to 34 percent. Using this figure, 10, rather than 14 of the 17 Texas schools fall below the New Mexico average.

21 The practice is known as "looping" in elementary schools.

22 Knowing what is expected and being able to articulate it are also important for educators who are responsible for the meaningful application of state and/or local content and performance standards in their classrooms.

23 The prevalence of plans for alternative assessment in New Mexico charter schools is attributable, at least in part, to the state's relatively liberal waiver policy that predates charter school legislation. For example, Turquoise Trail Elementary School, one of the schools that later converted to charter status, had previously received state approval for its alternative curriculum.

24 In a few cases, different facets of these two approaches are combined to produce complex school management arrangements.

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Notes and References

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SEDL
Southwest Educational Development Laboratory
Wesley A. Hoover, Ph.D., President and CEO
211 East Seventh Street, Austin, Texas 78701 (512) 476-6861